DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 287 657 RC 016 472

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TITLE Motivating the Mexican American Student. Fact Sheet.
INSTITUTION ERIC Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools, Las Cruces, N. Mex.
SPONS AGENCY National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 4p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Information Analyses - ERIC Information Analysis Products (071)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Aspiration; Bilingual Education; Cognitive Style; Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Influences; Elementary Secondary Education; Higher Education; *Language Role; Mexican American Education; *Mexican Americans; *Motivation Techniques; Role Models; Self Concept; *Student Motivation; Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Role

ABSTRACT

To understand how to best motivate the Mexican American student, one must look not only to the factors considered relevant to achievement in mainstream Anglo American society, but also to specific problems faced by this minority group. Language barriers, cultural differences, economic background, and family attitudes combine to affect the educational and occupational aspirations of Mexican American students. Increased cross-cultural awareness by teachers is probably the key to motivating the Mexican American student. To begin with, since language is the most important manifestation of one's self, to deny the Mexican Americans' mother tongue is to deny their identity and thus eliminate motivation. Therefore, teachers of Mexican American students should be proficient in Spanish, to enable communication in the students' mother tongue, which would provide shared experiences between teacher and students and establish a link between the students' highly valued family and home and their school. Teachers can help enhance self-esteem through a positive attitude toward Mexican Americans, reinforcing student strengths, and setting high standards for achievement. Motivational and occupational role models should be provided. Finally, teachers must be aware of the educational implications of the learning style of Mexican American students. (JHZ)

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MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

Motivating the Mexican American Student

by

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MEXICAN AMERICAN EDUCATION

FACT SHEET

MOTIVATING THE MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDENT

What Factors Affect The Motivation And Achievement of Mexican American Students?

To understand how to best motivate the Mexican American student, one must look not only to the factors considered relevant to achievement in mainstream Anglo American society, but also to specific problems faced by this minority group (9). Language barriers, cultural differences, economic background and family attitudes combine to affect the educational and occupational aspirations of Mexican American students.

Mexican American parents and children may aspire to relatively high levels of achievement in education, but for many, their actual expectations are much lower. This may be because Mexican Americans have experienced frustration in so many areas that they are conditioned not to count on their dreams and aspirations as being truly achievable. Lack of money and opportunity, as well as lack of role models, are major obstacles to Mexican Americans achieving high levels in education (5).

Differences in language and culture and a predominantly Anglo educational system, as well as a tendency toward stereotyping of Mexican Americans, are factors influencing motivation (15). When Mexican American children, because of their language and/or culture, do not or cannot fit the Anglo concept of an American student, negative reactions by Anglo teachers inevitably inhibit the student's motivation (5). These negative reactions tend to be reinforced by textbooks stereotyping the Mexican American as inferior to the Anglo American (10). Cultural factors may also account for low academic achievement by Mexican American students. Differences between Mexican American children and the Anglo teacher may cause numerous misunderstandings which prevent accurate measurement of the children's abilities (4). Negative attitudes of teachers toward Mexican American students have offered these students little incentive to take initiative or share in classroom responsibilities (5).

Mexican American parents and family may also contribute to low levels of motivation and achievement in their children by stressing the importance of family and de-emphasizing independent behavior (2). This lack of emphasis on independence for Mexican American children may be a critical factor in successful performance in school, since classrooms tend to be structured to require student initiative (2). Mexican American students may be more cooperatively-oriented, because of family emphasis on interdependence, than are Anglo students, a seemingly desirable orientation that may actually prove to be a handicap in America's school system, with its emphasis on individual initiative and competition (1, 5, 10).

How Can Teachers Better Motivate their Mexican American Students?

Increased cross-cultural awareness by teachers is probably the key to motivating the Mexican American student. To begin with, since language is the most important manifestation of one's self, to deny the Mexican Americans' mother tongue is to deny their identity and thus eliminate motivation (4). Therefore, teachers of Mexican American students should be proficient in Spanish, to enable communication in the students' mother tongue, which would provide shared experience between teacher and students and establish a link between the students' highly valued family and home and their school (4, 5, 11). To reinforce Mexican American students' self-confidence, it would be beneficial to teach them to write in Spanish before teaching them to write in English (4). To enable such instruction, bilingual education programs should include inservice teacher education and parental involvement (5). The latter should include interviews and an assessment of the home environment, which could prove useful to discovering problems students may have and to help them overcome these problems (15). These interviews could also provide the impetus for encouraging Mexican American parents to give their children more independence training, which could lead to more independent effort and initiative by Mexican American students in the competitive classroom (2).

For Mexican Americans to develop into successful students and individuals, they must have pride in themselves and in their culture (4). Teachers can help enhance this pride and encourage motivation through a positive attitude toward Mexican Americans, reinforcing student strengths and setting high standards for achievement (4, 5). Both bilingual and non-bilingual programs can also help counteract the negative stereotyping in textbooks by using bicultural materials which generate self-esteem through appreciation of the Mexican American cultural heritage (10). Mexican holidays can be celebrated by the whole class, in addition to traditional Anglo American holidays (6, 7). Mexican and Mexican American famous figures, such as Benito Juarez and Cesar Chavez, can be discussed and parallels drawn to Anglo American heroes like George Washington (14, 16). The ERIC system contains many examples of both bilingual and bicultural materials which can be used in the classroom to motivate Mexican American students to higher achievement and aspirations and to enhance their pride in their culture and themselves (6, 7, 11).

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Providing motivational and occupational role models and expanding possible career options for Mexican American students cannot be overemphasized (3, 8, 16, 17). Schools with limited resources should seek closer involvement with groups like 4-H Clubs, Boy and Girl Scouts, and Future Farmers of America to help provide programs and motivational role models (15). Cooperative work assignments at the college level can not only expose and motivate students toward particular careers, but can also introduce them to appropriate role models (15, 17).

Finally, teachers must be aware of the educational implications of the learning style of Mexican American students in order to have a positive effect on their motivation and corresponding achievement (5). Concept formation is often highly developed in Mexican American students, although they may have trouble communicating their ideas (5). The written word is less important than the spoken word; clear illustrations and examples are more effective in communicating ideas than is philosophizing (11). Mexican American children tend to be more highly motivated in a cooperative setting than in a competitive setting (1, 10). Teachers can enlist this inclination toward cooperation to lead students to learn new concepts. However, attempts to force students into accepting new or different ideas may lead only to token acceptance but not to actual change of mind. In the words of Jose Angel Gutierrez, "You have got to bring them around so that you end up getting them to agree with you because they have the wisdom to understand what you say" (12).

What Sources Might Help In Learning More About Mexican American Student Motivation?

A good source to begin with is the Summer 1980 issue of *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, which contains interviews with well-known Mexican American leaders, providing insight into Mexican American culture and role models of successful Mexican Americans (11, 12). Other sources include programs, workshops, and conferences on motivating minorities which have been conducted across the nation, such as the Workshop for Program Directors in Engineering Education of Minorities (15). Specific information on the role of teachers and role models in making Mexican American students aware of career opportunities in engineering and the sciences can be found in an ERIC/CRESS publication (17). Other material on occupational role models for Mexican American students is also available from ERIC (3, 16).

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March 1982